

Ambassador's remarks during a meeting at the Center for Civic Education

I am very pleased to be paying my third visit to Kindia in my seven months in your country. In my first visit, I participated in the inauguration of a water project at a local school, a collaboration between your community, the Coca Cola company and the US Government. I also had my first-ever discussion with Guinean voters.

During my second visit, I met with Guinean soldiers preparing to deploy to Mali as part of an international peacekeeping force. Guineans can be proud of the work their soldiers are performing in Mali, and we thank them for their service to their country, their sub-region, and the international community.

I have now been in Guinea for seven months, long enough to know that I like the country and the people, but not long enough to be an expert, or even someone who can say he is at all knowledgeable.

The Guinean political class is engaged in an important exercise: trying to reach consensus on complicated and difficult issues related to parliamentary elections. Politics are easy when people and their leaders can agree on such issues, but as is often the case, politics is more about managing disagreement than it is about finding common ground.

I have been in Guinea long enough to know that there are innumerable people of goodwill in every region, every party, every town and every village.

I have also been here long enough to know that the people of Guinea -- acting through their government, their political parties and their civil society -- are fully capable of resolving their disputes without recourse to violence or hate speech. Our role as international community is to provide technical assistance and a little money ... and to stand on the sidelines of the process shouting to all -- to borrow a phrase from President Obama -- "yes, you can."

There are difficult technical and political issues to be addressed, but we must not forget that what is most important:

For the first time in Guinea's history, her people are being asked to pass judgment on a sitting government halfway through its constitutional mandate. You, the voters, have a chance to say one of two things:

-- You can tell the current government that you are satisfied with its work, or at least satisfied that it is making progress in the right direction;

-- You can send a message to the current government that you have lost, or are losing, confidence in its ability to manage the country, and that you are thinking that perhaps it is time to give another party a chance to prove its worth.

The choice is yours. My government has no vote and wants no vote. We cherish our warm relations with the people of Guinea, but have no preference for any of your parties or any of your leaders. Our only goal is to work with the individuals and institution that reflect your choices and your values.

In his first visit to Africa as head of state, President Obama said that it is time to replace the rule of strong men with the rule of strong institutions. Guinea has been ruled by individuals since 1958, and most of its institutions have grown weaker over time.

It is not my place to comment on the individuals who ruled this country after independence; that is your sovereign right. You will disagree among yourselves, no differently than any other nation in the world.

However, I come from a political tradition that says that power that is not contained by institutions will inevitably be abused. Every day in the newspapers in the United States, we read of government officials convicted of corruption or other abuses of power. We have a fair number of high-ranking officials in jail, and – to be honest -- probably some more who belong there.

Guineans are no more or no less corrupt than Americans, and no better or worse at governance than our people, or any other nation in the world. What separates Guinea from Singapore is not culture; it is not DNA ... it is the fact that one country has well developed institutions of governance and one does not.

Our USAID-supported Centers for Civic Education are designed to help translate the will of the people into the institutions that govern in their name.

Many people believe that our common goal is free and just elections; not true. Our common goal has to be far more ambitious.

Our goal is free and just government; elections are the beginning of the process, not the end. Our view is that Guinea needs a parliament and other institutions of democratic government; together with civil society and media, these institutions take political dialog off the streets and into the legislature; words – not thrown stones or burning tires – become the permanent currency of political life.